

The Child Sexual Abuse **Language Guide**

Terms and definitions preferred
by victims and survivors of child
sexual abuse



National Centre for Action
on Child Sexual Abuse

Contents

Index of terms and definitions	3
Acknowledgements	5
Foreword	6
Support Information	7
Introduction	8
Preferred terms and definitions	8
1. Terms and definitions about age	9
2. Terms and definitions about the abuse	11
3. Terms and definitions about grooming	15
4. Terms and definitions about technology	17
5. Terms and definitions about people who experience child sexual abuse	19
6. Terms and definitions about telling people about child sexual abuse	21
7. Terms and definitions about people who commit child sexual abuse	23
8. Terms and definitions about legal concepts	24
Appendix 1. Sources of Terms and Definitions	27

Index of Terms and Definitions

Continued

Term	Section	Page
Online child sexual exploitation	4: Technology	14
Paedophile	7: People who Commit	18
Perpetrator	7: People who Commit	18
Predatory behaviour	3: Grooming	13
Problem sexual/sexualised behaviours	2: The Abuse	11
Purposeful disclosure	6: Telling People	17
Recant	6: Telling People	17
Secondary victims	5: People who Experience	16
Sex activity with a child	2: The Abuse	10
Sexual assault	2: The Abuse	11
Sexual extortion (sextortion)	4: Technology	14
Sexual play	2: The Abuse	12
Sexual relationship	2: The Abuse	12
Sexual violence	2: The Abuse	12
Sibling sexual abuse	2: The Abuse	11
Triggered disclosure	6: Telling People	17
Victim	5: People who Experience	15
Victim (in a legal process)	8: Legal Concepts	18
Victim-survivor	5: People who Experience	16
Victims and survivors	5: People who Experience	15

Acknowledgements

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre) respectfully acknowledges and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations and pay our respects to ancestors and Elders past and present.

We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culture and lore continue to lead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and acknowledge the tireless work to pursue justice outcomes for children and young people.

The National Centre supports decisions affecting people's lives being fundamentally informed by those people. And upholds truth-telling and agreement-making for justice as essential components of healing.

We seek to honour the lived and living expertise of all victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, harnessing all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds, and commit to substantially addressing the harm of child sexual abuse, now and well into the future.

We recognise that there are children and young people today who are experiencing sexual abuse and dedicate ourselves to doing all we can to expedite and promote their effective protection and care.

Stigma reduction and community awareness are critical priorities of the National Centre. We recognise the role that language plays in reducing stigma and raising community awareness. This document was created through the *Reshaping the Conversation* project, led by the National Centre with funding from the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

We wish to acknowledge the time, effort, and expertise of the advisors and participants who made this project possible. In particular, we would like to thank project advisors Angela Obradovic and Professor Ben Mathews, project working group members Danielle Rifahi and Lynelle Long and more than 100 victims and survivors of child sexual abuse who participated.

To access the Guide containing preferred terms and definitions, please refer to the [Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide](#).

Our Commitment

The establishment of a national centre to raise awareness and understanding of the impacts of child sexual abuse, support help-seeking and guide best practice advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment was a key recommendation (9.9) of the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Royal Commission identified that ongoing national leadership is necessary to improve outcomes for victims and survivors of past child sexual abuse and prevent future child sexual abuse.

Established in late 2021, the National Centre is a partnership between three respected organisations with strong histories of leadership in responding to child sexual abuse - Australian Childhood Foundation, Blue Knot Foundation and the Healing Foundation (each a Founding Member). The National Centre has an integrated governance structure that embeds the expertise of adults with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse, the rich strength of knowledge of First Nations Peoples and the voices of children and young people, as well as the expertise of researchers, practitioners, justice organisations, corporate entities, government and policy leaders.

At its core, the National Centre is a symbol of hope and an essential vehicle for action for many victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Its vision is for a community where children are safe and victims and survivors are supported to heal and recover, free of stigma and shame – a future without child sexual abuse.

A suggested citation for this document: The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (2025). Child Sexual Abuse Language Guide.

Foreword

Effective communication about complex issues requires deep consideration of how messages are received by those most directly affected, as well as the broader social impact such language can have. In the context of child sexual abuse, language plays a powerful role. It can either reinforce harmful myths and shift responsibility onto victims, or it can affirm the child's inherent right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Language can be a source of profound harm, not only to victims and survivors but also to their families and the wider community. Sometimes, language is deliberately used to downplay the seriousness and consequences of child sexual abuse. More often, harmful language is used unintentionally - repeated without reflection on its impact. Yet the words we choose shape societal understanding, attitudes, and beliefs. We believe that we all have an ethical obligation to use language that reduces trauma wherever we can. This Guide is intended to support reflection and promote language that minimises harm across all contexts.

The origin of this Language Guide is situated in the lived expertise of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Its development was prompted by a survivor's response to the language used in a public education campaign - language that, albeit unintentionally, appeared to place responsibility on the victim-survivor and perpetuate damaging misconceptions. This response highlighted the urgent need for survivor-informed language guidance and underscored the importance of centring victim and survivor perspectives in all prevention and justice efforts. When survivors are treated with care, respect and dignity, our collective response to child sexual abuse becomes more informed and effective.

Victims and survivors have been central to the creation of this Guide. As members of the project working group, each of us brought lived expertise and critical insight into how language can cause harm - both at an individual and systemic level. More than 100 survivors contributed to the project's research process, where they evaluated a wide range of terms over two rounds of surveys to establish consensus on preferred language and definitions.

Their contribution has been foundational, and we acknowledge their partnership with gratitude and respect.

This Guide highlights terms to avoid. We encourage particular attention to be paid to those terms and their recommended alternatives. Several terms in this Guide have multiple definitions - all of which met the threshold of acceptability by victims and survivors. We see this as a strength of this Guide as it reflects a diversity of child sexual abuse experiences and contexts. While some definitions resonate more than others for individual survivors, according to their experiences, so too might some be more appropriate or relevant in different professional or practice contexts. We invite you to choose the definition that suits your purpose, audience and role. Our intention is that the Language Guide is relevant for a broad range of contexts, including practice, communications, legal, academic and policy.

Importantly, this Guide is a living document. In recent years, the language around child sexual abuse has evolved significantly through critical reflection and survivor advocacy. As our understanding continues to grow, so too must the language we use, and it is important that this Guide reflects those changes. We encourage feedback and are committed to providing accessible ways for individuals and organisations to contribute to this Guide's ongoing development. In partnership with the National Centre, we especially value the continued input of victims and survivors, whose perspectives are essential to ensuring that this Guide remains relevant, respectful and impactful.

Angela Obradovic
Lynelle Long
Danielle Rifahi

*(Reshaping the Conversation Lived Experience
Working Group Members)*

This Language Guide refers to child sexual abuse and includes descriptions that may bring up strong feelings.

Please take care of yourself when reading the Guide and ask for help if you need it. You might want to talk to trusted family, kin or friends, or your counsellor or doctor or your Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Medical Service. We have also included support services below.

Support is available:

Lifeline

13 11 14 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – crisis support and suicide prevention.

13YARN

13 92 76 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – a culturally safe crisis support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

1800RESPECT

1800 737 732 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic and family violence and abuse.

Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service

1300 657 380 (9am–5pm, 7 days a week) – for adults impacted by childhood trauma including child sexual abuse.

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – phone counselling service for young people.

QLife

1800 184 527 (3PM to midnight, 7 days a week) – anonymous and free LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people in Australia wanting to talk about sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.

MensLine

1300 78 99 78 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) – counsellors specialise in family and relationship issues, including relationship breakdown, separation and divorce, parenting, family violence, suicide prevention and emotional well-being.

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a national crisis with recent data estimating that 28.5% of Australian adults were sexually abused as children¹. Sexual abuse during childhood can have far-reaching and long-term impacts. Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse can experience lifelong health, social, financial and cultural outcomes as a result of the abuse.

Addressing this complex societal problem is central to the work of the National Centre, together with government, service providers, researchers and policy makers. We know that language matters and in doing our work we must consider how we talk or write about child sexual abuse.

Currently however, there is little consistency in the language that is used in relation to child sexual abuse, across sectors and services. Achieving universal agreement on language across a range of contexts is unlikely given that challenges and purposes differ.

In light of these challenges, we want to ensure that, at a minimum, the language used is respectful, compassionate and inclusive. Further, the way we describe child sexual abuse and those that have experienced it must not cause offense or anguish to victims and survivors, not stigmatise or blame and not minimise the harm and the lifelong impacts of child sexual abuse.

For this reason, the National Centre has created a child sexual abuse language guide, which includes **terms and definitions that are preferred by victims and survivors**.



¹ Mathews B, Pacella RE, Scott JG, et al. The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Med J Aust* 2023; 218 (6 Suppl): S13-S18. DOI: 10.5694/mja2.51873

Preferred Terms and Definitions

In the next section we present the terms and definitions for language relating to child sexual abuse, as preferred by victims and survivors. It is important to remember that this is **not an exhaustive list** of all terms and definitions that exist, but instead, these represent those that are **currently in use** and were **preferred for continued** use by most of the victims and survivors who participated in the research project.

For some concepts, there are multiple similar terms; and, for some terms, there are multiple definitions. In such instances, multiple definitions are presented in order of preference, with those receiving the highest scores from victims and survivors first. It is worth noting, however, that all terms and definitions presented here were rated as acceptable amongst the victims and survivors involved in this project.

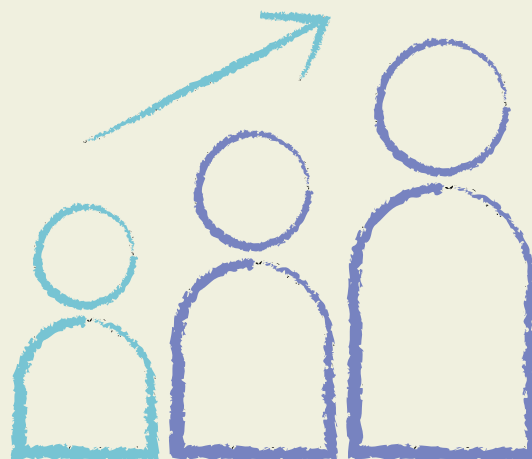
Throughout, you will also note that terms to avoid are included in each section. While these terms are discouraged and not preferred for use by the victims and survivors involved in the development of this language guide, it is important to note that in certain contexts (e.g., legal, clinical) these terms may still be used.

In viewing both the preferred terms, and those to avoid, it is important to remember that language has evolved and changed. Some terms are quite contemporary, having been developed only recently and reflecting a growing awareness and knowledge. Other terms and definitions, however, still contain phrases that reflect outdated beliefs.

Finally, please note that there are a number of definitions that do not address the illegality or criminal nature of the act they are describing. In such instances, and to ensure clarity, these definitions are identified with further explanatory text included as footnotes.

1. Terms and definitions about age

Age is a crucial component of child sexual abuse, as it differentiates it from sexual abuse of an adult. This is an important differentiation, as there are unique abuses of power and tactics used when committing sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Further to age, there are a range of developmental stages throughout childhood, including pre-pubescent and pubescent, or young child compared to adolescent or older child etc. There are important variations in how these stages are characterised in the community, across jurisdictions and contexts (e.g., legal settings, clinical settings). As such, the terms below are for general use in relation to child sexual abuse.



Term	Definition(s)
1. Child	A person under the age of 18, regardless of the age of majority or age of consent locally.
2. Children and young people	Individuals under the age of 18 years.
3. Adolescent/teenager/teen	When these terms are used in the context of child sexual abuse, it is important to distinguish between adolescents or teenagers up to age 18 (who are legally children) and adolescents or teenagers aged 18 and above.

Terms

Minor

Reason to avoid

This term is often used interchangeably with children and young people to describe those under 18 years of age. The term implies a level of inferiority to adults, which contributes to the structural power imbalance between children and adults and the erosion of children's rights. However, some pre-existing definitions include the word 'minor'. Where possible, these can be improved by replacing this word with 'children and young people'.

Instead, Use...

Child

Children

Young person

Adolescent

Teenager/teen



Term

Innocent

Reason to avoid

When this term is used to describe children who have experienced child sexual abuse it is problematic in two ways: awareness and responsibility.

In this context, the term 'innocent' conveys not having knowledge or awareness of sexual activity. It reinforces victim blaming notions that child sexual abuse only happens to young children with less 'knowledge', not older children and adolescents; fuelling myths and inaccurate attitudes that older children (i.e., teenagers) cannot be victims of child sexual abuse, or are complicit in the abuse, because their knowledge and awareness provides 'capacity' to consent. This is incorrect.

This term also suggests a level of responsibility or moral judgement upon the child or young person that is irrelevant to the abuse they have experienced. Using 'innocent' to describe a child suggests that they are not guilty of something, or not responsible for the abuse committed against them. There are no circumstances in which a child or young person is responsible for being sexual abused, and it is the responsibility of adults to keep them safe.

2. Terms and definitions about the abuse

The way that each victim and survivor describes their abuse will be unique, and dependent on their own lived and living experience. There are overarching definitions for child sexual abuse presented below, which act as an umbrella to describe many, but not all, forms of child sexual abuse. Also presented are more specific terms related to different types of abuse. Some of these terms and definitions are brief, while others are more expansive and specific in their description of abuse.



Term

Definition(s)

1. Child sexual abuse

Any activity with a child before the age of legal consent that is for the sexual gratification of an adult or a substantially older child. These activities include oral-genital, genital-genital, genital-rectal, hand-genital, hand-rectal, or hand-breast contact; exposure of sexual anatomy; forced viewing of sexual anatomy; and showing of pornography to a child or using a child in the production of pornography.²

OR

Not only the violent sexual assault of children, but also other activities, including inappropriate touching, where the child does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent or for which the child is not developmentally prepared. Child sexual abuse includes a range of other offenses, including grooming, viewing sexual abuse images and encouraging children to act in sexually inappropriate ways. Both adults and minors can commit child sexual abuse, and it can occur online and offline.²

OR

Any sexual act between an adult and a minor or between two minors when one exerts power over the other; forcing, coercing or persuading a child to engage in any type of sexual act. It also includes non-contact acts such as exhibitionism, exposure to pornography, voyeurism and communication in a sexual manner by phone or online.¹

OR

Contact and non-contact sexual acts by an adult or child in a position of power or control over a child victim when the child either does not have capacity to provide consent, or has capacity but does not provide consent.²

OR

Any act that exposes or subjects a child or young person to, or involves a child or young person in, sexual activities that they do not understand, they do not or cannot consent to, and/or are unlawful.

² This definition includes criminal activity. The legal age for consensual sexual activity is 16–17 years across Australian States and Territories. It is a criminal offence for adults in positions of care, supervision or authority to engage in sexual activity with a child (person under 18 years). There are also a range of criminal (incest) offences where the victim and accused are closely related. Age of consent does not apply in these circumstances.

Term	Definition(s)
2. Sexual activity with a child	<p>Sexual penetration of a person younger than 18. Sexual penetration include(s) the penetration of the vagina, anus or mouth by the penis or other body part, and also includes the penetration of the vagina or anus by an object.²</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Sexual activity with a person younger than 18.²</p>
3. Historical child sexual abuse	<p>Child sexual abuse that happened to someone who is now an adult, when they were under the age of 18. The abuse could have happened many years ago and may not have been disclosed for a long time.²</p> <p>OR</p> <p>A term used to describe child sexual abuse that happened to someone (now an adult) when they were under the age of 18. This could mean the abuse happened years or decades ago and may not be remembered or disclosed for many years.²</p>
4. Child sexual exploitation	<p>A form of sexual abuse targeting children and young people under 18 who are manipulated or coerced to undertake sexual acts in exchange for any actual or promised benefit, for example food, accommodation, affection, money and/or gifts.²</p> <p>OR</p> <p>The sexual maltreatment of children where some form of remuneration may occur, which consists of, but is not limited to, child prostitution, early or forced marriage, sale of children, trafficking of children for sexual purposes, child sex tourism, child sexual abuse material and child sexual performances. Commercial child sexual exploitation can occur online and offline.²</p>
5. Commercial child sexual exploitation	<p>The production and distribution of child exploitation material, exploiting children for prostitution, which may involve promising money, food, clothing, accommodation or drugs to a child, the abduction and trafficking of children for sexual abuse purposes, and sexual exploitation of children in the context of tourism.²</p>
6. Harmful sexual behaviour	<p>Any sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that fall outside what may be considered developmentally, socially and culturally expected, may cause harm to themselves or others, and occur either face-to-face and/or via technology. When these behaviours involve another child or young person, they may include lack of consent, reciprocity, mutuality and involve the use of coercion, force or misuse of power.²</p> <p>OR</p> <p>A broad range of sexual behaviours in children and young people. This includes behaviours that affect their own development, as well as behaviours that are coercive, sexually aggressive or predatory to others.</p>


² This definition includes criminal activity. The legal age for consensual sexual activity is 16–17 years across Australian States and Territories. It is a criminal offence for adults in positions of care, supervision or authority to engage in sexual activity with a child (person under 18 years). There are also a range of criminal (incest) offences where the victim and accused are closely related. Age of consent does not apply in these circumstances.

Term	Definition(s)
6. Harmful sexual behaviour	Harmful sexual behaviours are those displayed by a child (person below 18 years) that cause harm to others and/or themselves. Harmful sexual behaviours exist across a continuum of inappropriate, problematic, abusive and/or violent sexual behaviours, and can occur face-to-face and/or via technology between children who are peers, friends, family members or strangers.
7. Problem sexual/sexualised behaviours	A range of sexual behaviours that are outside the developmental norm of a child or young person. They can be self-directed or directed towards others. These behaviours can be non-contact, for example sexualised conversations or gestures. They can also involve contact, for example non-consensual touching of others. Other concerning behaviours can include sexual interest in children or adults of a very different age, sexual behaviours preventing other activities, aggressive sexual behaviours or compulsive habits.
8. Incest	<p>The sexual abuse of a person by a family member or a primary caregiver.²</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Incest is human sexual activity between family members or close relatives. This typically includes sexual activity between people in consanguinity (blood relations), and sometimes those related by affinity (marriage or stepfamily), adoption or lineage. It is forbidden and considered immoral in most societies and can lead to an increased risk of genetic disorders in children in case of pregnancy.²</p>
9. Intrafamilial child sexual abuse	Child sexual abuse that occurs within the family environment. Abuse may involve relatives, primary carers, guardians or others who feel like family from the child's point of view. ²
10. Sibling sexual abuse	When there is sexual activity between a child or young person and a sibling that is non-consensual or coercive, or where there is an inequality of power or development between them. ²
11. Sexual assault	Any behaviour of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened. It is sexual behaviour that someone has not agreed to, where another person uses physical or emotional force against them. It does not always include physical harm. ²

² This definition includes criminal activity. The legal age for consensual sexual activity is 16–17 years across Australian States and Territories. It is a criminal offence for adults in positions of care, supervision or authority to engage in sexual activity with a child (person under 18 years). There are also a range of criminal (incest) offences where the victim and accused are closely related. Age of consent does not apply in these circumstances.

Term	Definition(s)
11. Sexual assault	Physical contact, or intent of contact, of a sexual nature directed towards another person where that person does not give consent, gives consent as a result of intimidation or deception or consent is proscribed (i.e., the person is legally deemed incapable of giving consent because of youth, temporary/permanent (mental) incapacity or there is a familial relationship). ²

12. Sexual violence	Behaviour of a sexual nature directed toward a person which makes that person feel uncomfortable, distressed or threatened, and to which that person has not freely given consent, or which involves another person using physical, emotional, psychological or verbal force or coercive behaviour against that person. ²
---------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------




Term

Sexual play

Reason to avoid

'Play' minimises the harm caused by this form of child sexual abuse (i.e., harmful sexual behaviour). This is not to be confused with age and developmentally appropriate sexual activity between children or young people of similar age and developmental stage.



Instead, Use...

Harmful sexual behaviour

Problematic sexual behaviour



Term

Sexual relationship

Affair

In a relationship with

Reason to avoid

These terms are traditionally used to refer to consenting relationships between adults and imply a level of consent that children and young people cannot provide.

These terms minimise the harm caused by child sexual abuse by introducing concepts of romance and mutuality, and ignores the process of grooming, manipulation and coercion.



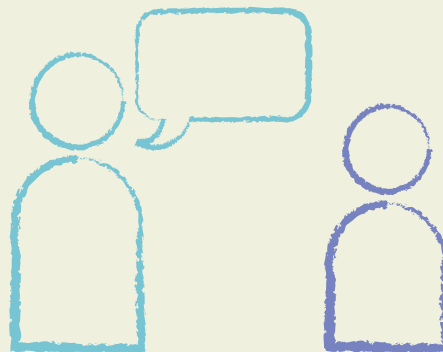
Instead, Use...

Child sexual abuse

Child sexual exploitation

3. Terms and definitions about grooming

Grooming is a complex process that can occur before, during and after child sexual abuse. Grooming can take many forms, and as such, a range of definitions for this are presented below. In addition, grooming can occur across a range of contexts, including in-person and online.



Term

Definition(s)

1. Grooming

The process of establishing or building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person.

OR

When a person engages in predatory conduct to prepare a child or young person for sexual activity at a later time. Grooming can include communicating or attempting to befriend or establish a relationship or other emotional connection with the child or their parent or carer.

OR

Building a relationship, emotional connection or trust with a child, young person or their family and friends online or offline with the intention of committing a sexual offence.

OR

Grooming a child (or their parent or carer) refers to the way some offenders form relationships and build trust with children, parents, carers, teachers and other children in order to get close to a child and create the opportunity for sexual abuse. It can be difficult to identify because the behaviour itself may not be abusive or sexual. Grooming can often occur online.

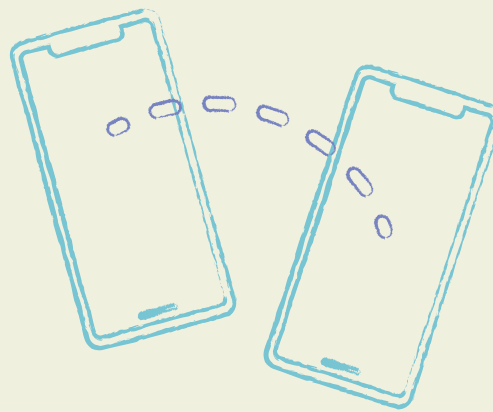
OR

Behaviours that manipulate and control a child, as well as their family, kin and carers, other support networks or organisations in order to perpetrate child sexual abuse. The intent of grooming is to gain access to the child or young person to perpetrate child sexual abuse, obtain sexual material of the child or young person, obtain the child or young person's trust and/or compliance, maintain the child or young person's silence and/or avoid discovery of sexual abuse. Grooming can occur online or in-person.

Term	Definition(s)
1. Grooming	Grooming is a process of manipulation and/or intimidation of a child, children, family, kin, carer(s), support network(s) or organisation(s), by a person(s), community or organisation(s), for the purpose or facilitation of child sexual abuse. This may be face-to-face and/or technology-assisted manipulation, and can include emotional manipulation, erosion of autonomy, befriending, gift-giving, privileging, bullying, threatening, taunting, lying, isolating, silencing and controlling behaviours that create opportunity for, compliance with and non-disclosure of child sexual abuse.
2. Online child grooming	Online child grooming is the process of establishing and building a relationship with a child or young person while online, to facilitate sexual abuse that is either physical (in person) or online. This is achieved through the internet or other technologies such as phones, social media, gaming, chat and messaging apps.
3. Predatory behaviour	Predatory behaviour refers to actions and conduct characterised by the exploitation, manipulation or harm of others for personal gain, satisfaction or gratification. This behaviour often involves deceit, aggression or manipulation to take advantage of vulnerable individuals or situations. In the context of identifying sexual predators, predatory behaviour specifically pertains to actions aimed at grooming, coercing or engaging in sexual exploitation with others, typically those who are less able to protect themselves, such as children or individuals in vulnerable circumstances. Recognising and addressing predatory behaviour is essential for protecting potential victims and maintaining safety in various settings.

4. Terms and definitions about technology

Increasingly, technology forms part of the sexual abuse of children. There are a variety of ways in which technology-facilitated abuse can be committed, and as such, a number of definitions for this are presented below. In considering such forms of abuse, it is important to remember that instances where abuse occurs entirely online or virtually (non-contact) **does not mean the abuse is any less of an offence or less traumatic** for victims and survivors.



Term	Definition(s)
1. Child sexual abuse material	<p>Any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.¹</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Material that depicts or describes a child, or a representation of a child, who is or appears to be under the age of 18, and who is or appears to be in a sexual pose or sexual activity, or that shows or describes the person's sexual organs or breasts as a dominant characteristic.¹</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Material that depicts or describes a person who is, appears to be, or is implied to be a child, as a victim of sexual abuse, engaged in or apparently engaged in a sexual pose or sexual activity (whether or not in the presence of other persons), in the presence of another person who is engaged in or apparently engaged in a sexual pose or sexual activity, or the private parts of a person who is, appears to be, or is implied to be, a child.²</p>
2. Image-based abuse	When intimate, nude or sexual images/videos are shared without consent. ²
3. Live online child sexual abuse	The use of the internet by a person to view, pay to view or to provide instructions and view in real time, online child sexual exploitation material. ²
4. Online child sexual abuse and exploitation	All child sexual abuse and exploitation that at any point has a connection to the online environment.
5. Online child sexual exploitation	The use of technology or the internet to facilitate the sexual exploitation of a child, including the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material online. The most common forms of online child sexual exploitation include grooming, live streaming, consuming child sexual abuse material and coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes. ²

² This definition includes criminal activity. The legal age for consensual sexual activity is 16–17 years across Australian States and Territories. It is a criminal offence for adults in positions of care, supervision or authority to engage in sexual activity with a child (person under 18 years). There are also a range of criminal (incest) offences where the victim and accused are closely related. Age of consent does not apply in these circumstances.

6. Sexual extortion (sextortion)

A form of online blackmail where an offender threatens to reveal a person's personal sexual images, unless they give into their demands.²



Term

Child pornography

Child porn

'Kiddy' porn

Reason to avoid

'Pornography' or 'porn' are traditionally used to depict content created by consenting adults. Using this in relation to child sexual abuse material implies a level of consent that children and young people cannot provide. These terms also minimise the harm caused by child sexual abuse, and suggest complicity on behalf of the child or young person involved.



Instead, Use...

Child sexual abuse material

Child sexual exploitation material

5. Terms and definitions about people who experience child sexual abuse


People who have experienced child sexual abuse will have preferences for how they are referred to. The list below is not exhaustive, but instead represents some of the more common terms and definitions, and those that are acceptable to most victims and survivors who participated in this project. If unsure about the language someone prefers, it may be helpful to ask them.

Further, a note on gender and pronouns. Individuals of all genders experience child sexual abuse. It is important to use inclusive language and avoid gender-stereotypes that can perpetuate myths, for example that all victims and survivors are female-identifying and all perpetrators are male-identifying.



Term	Definition(s)
1. Victim	<p>A person who has suffered harm as the direct result of an offence or offences.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Commonly understood, a person who is, or has been, sexually exploited or abused. Different definitions of victim trigger different consequences; therefore, it is important to use them contextually.</p>
2. Victims and survivors	<p>People who have been sexually abused as children or young people. We use both terms in an attempt to capture victims and survivor's preferences for terminology, and to capture current and historical abuse. In some contexts, the term "victim" has a defined legal meaning. We recognise that some people prefer the term "survivor" because of its association with resilience and empowerment. We also recognise many have lost their lives as a direct result of abuse, or do not feel they have "survived" the abuse and its impacts. In these cases, the term "victim" may be more appropriate. We recognise that some people do not identify with either of these terms.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>People of any age, background or culture who have experienced child sexual abuse. The terms 'victims and survivors' and 'people with lived and living experience of child sexual abuse' are used interchangeably in recognition that different language resonates at different times and is appropriate for and with different people and contexts.</p>

Term	Definition(s)
3. Victim-survivor	The person who experienced child sexual abuse. This includes those who are alive and with us today, and those who are no longer with us. In line with a trauma-informed approach, we acknowledge that victims and survivors have the right to define their identity, and the terms “victim” and “survivor” can for some be considered as existing on a continuum of recovery. We also recognise that some people may not identify with either of these terms.
4. Adult survivor	A person over 18 years of age who has experienced child sexual abuse.
5. Secondary victims	<p>A person who has been affected by the abuse perpetrated against the primary victim-survivor. A secondary victim may include partners, children, parents, siblings, extended family and witnesses.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>People who are affected by child sexual abuse, but are not the primary (the ‘abused’) victim. The secondary victim’s exposure to the abuse may be because of their connection to the primary victim or their connection to the perpetrator. Secondary victims can include perpetrator’s partners and children, parents and carers of abused children and people who witnessed abuse.</p>




Term

Child prostitute
Child prostitution
Child sex worker

Reason to avoid

Prostitution or sex work are terms referring to professions or occupations engaged in by consenting adults. Using these in relation to child sexual abuse implies a level of consent that children and young people cannot provide. These terms also minimise the harm caused by child sexual abuse and suggest complicity on behalf of the child or young person involved.



Instead, Use...

Child sexual abuse victim
Child sexual exploitation

6. Terms and definitions about telling people about child sexual abuse

Disclosure – the act of telling someone about a child sexual abuse experience – is complex and multifaceted. This process can occur more than once, in a range of different settings, and is uniquely individual to each victim and survivor. There is no right or wrong way to disclose, and some people choose not to disclose at all. For this reason, the terms and definitions presented below aim to capture the diversity through which this experience can occur.

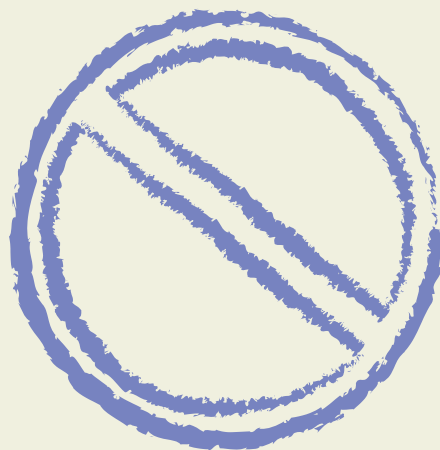


Term	Definition(s)
1. Disclosure	<p>The act of making something known or the fact that is made known.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Telling another person about the abuse either formally or informally, voluntarily or in response to others' invitations to tell.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Several types of disclosure have been identified, including purposeful telling (i.e., direct verbal means), accidental telling (i.e., third-party detection), elicited/prompted telling (i.e., response to inquiry by a helping person), behavioural telling (i.e., behavioural, nonverbal communication; indirect verbal hints), telling purposely withheld (i.e., choice not to tell, denials) and triggered telling (i.e., in response to delayed memories).</p>
2. Behavioural disclosure	<p>Victim intentionally attempts to tell through behaviour, non-verbal communication or indirect verbal hints.</p>
3. Elicited/prompted disclosure	<p>Disclosure through investigative interviewing, counselling, art, play or talk therapy or supportive environments.</p>
4. Purposeful disclosure	<p>Intentional disclosure of the sexual abuse through direct verbal means.</p>
5. Triggered disclosure	<p>Disclosure precipitated by recall of forgotten or repressed memories of the sexual abuse.</p>


Term	Definition(s)
6. Recant	<p>To withdraw or repudiate (a statement or belief) formally and publicly.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>When a victim of crime rescinds their accusation. In some instances, recanting may involve victims changing allegations that were accurate, resulting in false recantation.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>When someone who disclosed child sexual abuse retracts or withdraws their statements.</p>

7. Terms and definitions about people who commit child sexual abuse

The most appropriate term and definition used to describe someone who is committing, or has committed, child sexual abuse will vary based on the context. There will be legal and clinical settings in which very specific terminology will be used for criminal or diagnostic reasons. The terms and definitions presented below represent those that most victims and survivors who participated in this project prefer for use when talking about the people who abused or harmed them.



Term	Definition(s)
1. Offender	<p>A person who is found to have done something which is prohibited by law. Until this happens, a person may be termed a defendant or accused.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>A person who has committed a crime. If an offender is sentenced to serve a period of time in a prison, they can be called "the prisoner".</p>
2. Perpetrator	<p>An adult who has committed a child sexual abuse-related offence. This includes offenders who have been convicted by a court.</p>



Term


Paedophile

Reason to avoid

'Paedophile' or 'paedophilia' are formal psychiatric diagnostic terms to describe a specific paraphilic disorder where a person has a primary or exclusive sexual preference for prepubescent children.

While this term is often used colloquially to describe all perpetrators of child sexual abuse, it is often a misuse of a medical term and reduces awareness of abuse against older children (i.e., pubescent children, adolescents).

The majority of child sexual abuse is not perpetrated by people who would meet the diagnostic criteria for paedophilic disorder, and not all paedophiles act on their sexual preference/interest. It equally minimises the fact that child sexual abuse is perpetrated by 'ordinary' people in the community that are known and trusted. Further using this term can contribute to misconceptions that all child sexual abuse occurs because of psychiatric disorders. 'Paedophile' or 'paedophilia' should only be used in circumstances where formal diagnosis has occurred, and use of this term is appropriate.



Instead, Use...

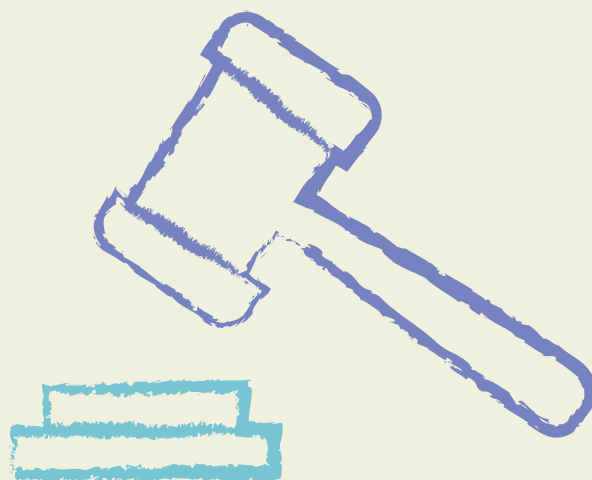
Perpetrator

Offender

8. Terms and definitions about legal concepts

The following terms and definitions relate to a range of legal concepts that are not unique or entirely specific to child sexual abuse. Instead, these terms and definitions are presented here to provide guidance on how most victims and survivors who participated in this project would prefer they be used when described such legal concepts.

It is particularly important to be aware that in almost all jurisdictions, 'consent' does not legally apply when it comes to children, including those under 18 years but over the age of consent, or in situations where the adult is in a role of authority, care or supervision over the child. This is the case regardless of their developing independence, maturity or knowledge about sex.



Term	Definition(s)
1. Victim (in a legal process)	The person who experienced the child sexual abuse, sometimes called the complainant or accuser.
2. Consent	<p>An agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent should be clearly and freely communicated. Consent cannot be given by individuals who are underage, intoxicated or incapacitated by drugs or alcohol or asleep or unconscious.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Consent is the free, full and informed agreement for an activity or thing to happen, given by a person who has the legal and cognitive capacity to agree. This agreement can be changed or withdrawn at any time.</p>
3. Age of consent	<p>Age of consent laws are designed to protect children from physical and psychological harm caused when subjected to sexual activity before they are mature enough to consent to such activity. Consent in this context refers to full, informed consent, where the person is aware of the consequences of giving that consent.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>The age at which a person is considered legally able to agree to sexual activity with another person.</p>
4. Allegation	Legally, something that is claimed but not proved.
5. Alleged offender	Legally, until a person is proved to be guilty of a crime, the person is called an "alleged offender", an "accused" or a "defendant".

Term	Definition(s)
6. Conviction	When a person accused of committing a criminal offence is guilty of that offence, a record of their guilt is recorded on their criminal history.
7. Crime	<p>An illegal (or unlawful) act.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>An action by a person that is against the law. It may also be called an 'offence' or a 'criminal offence'.</p>




Term

Enthusiastic consent

Reason to avoid

The concept of enthusiastic consent may be relevant in certain circumstances, for example, between adults, or between young people above the age of consent. However, it is irrelevant in the context of child sexual abuse.



Instead, Use...

No alternate term is required, as a child cannot consent to sexual abuse. Similarly, in situations where an adult is in a position of care, supervision or authority over a child or young person, considerations of consent do not apply.




Term

Complainant

Reason to avoid

This term is often used in legal settings to describe a victim and survivor of child sexual abuse. This term carries negative and victim-blaming connotations, as it implies someone is 'complaining' about the abuse they have experienced. It is also considered to be overly legalistic for use outside of legal contexts.



Instead, Use...

Victim-survivor



Term

Allegedly

Allege

Reason to avoid

While the terms 'allege' or 'allegedly' may be legally required in some circumstances, these terms should be avoided, where possible, as they can imply disbelief of victims and survivors, or doubt over their reports of child sexual abuse.



Instead, Use...

No alternate term required

Appendix. Sources of Terms and Definitions

The following sources, presented alphabetically, were used to compile existing publicly available terms and definitions for consideration by the victims and survivors that participated in this project.

Some terms and definitions, as drawn from these sources, are presented in this language guide unchanged, while others have been amended with feedback from victims and survivors.

Alaggia R. Many ways of telling: expanding conceptualizations of child sexual abuse disclosure. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2004;28(11):1213-1227.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. Sexual assault – perpetrators. 2022.

Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation. Terminology and definitions of online child sexual exploitation. 2024.

Australian Government. Guides to social policy law: National Redress Scheme. 2024.

Australian Institute of Family Studies. Age of consent laws in Australia. 2021.

Australian Institute of Family Studies. Problem sexual behaviours and sexually abusive behaviours in Australian children and young people. 2017.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australia's children: child abuse and neglect. 2022.

Berry Street. Problematic sexualised behaviour. 2024.

Bravehearts. What is child sexual abuse? 2024.

Bravehearts. What is consent? 2024.

Bravehearts. What is historical child sexual abuse? 2024.

Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse. 2023.

Commonwealth Department of Public Prosecutions. Commonly used terms. 2024.

Department of Social Services. Glossary for the National Outcome Standards for Perpetrator Interventions. 2024.

Draucker CB, Martsolf DS. Storying childhood sexual abuse. *Qualitative Health Research*. 2008;18(8). doi: 10.1177/10497323083119925

eSafety Commissioner. Consent. 2024.

Felzen Johnson C. Child sexual abuse. *The Lancet*. 2004;364(9432):462-470.

Foley K. Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools: report. 2024.

IncestAWARE. What is incest? 2024.

Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. 2016.

International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. Glossary of terms. Responsible reporting: protecting children from revictimization. 2024.

Johnson AK. Protecting children's rights in Asian tourism. *International Journal of Children's Rights*. 2014;22(3):581-617.

Malouff J. False recantations by adults of sexual assault allegations. University of New England. 2021.

Mathews B, Collin-Vézina D. Child sexual abuse: Toward a conceptual model and definition. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. 2019 Apr;20(2):131-48.

Mathews B, Pacella R, Dunne M...Lawrence D. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS): protocol for a national survey of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect, associated mental disorders and physical health problems, and burden of disease. *BMJ Open*. 2021;11:e047074. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-047074

National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. Language Guide. 2024.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Coping with the shock of intrafamilial sexual abuse. 2009.

National Office for Child Safety. National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030. 2024.

National Office for Child Safety. Reporting on child sexual abuse – guidance for media and victims and survivors. 2024.

National Office for Child Safety. Report historical or past abuse. 2024.

National Office for Child Safety. What is child sexual abuse? 2024.

National Office for Child Safety. Who perpetrates child sexual abuse? 2024.

National Redress Scheme. What is institutional child sexual abuse? 2024.

Queensland Government. Indicators of child sexual abuse and barriers to disclosure. 2024.

Queensland Police. What is consent? 2021.

RAINN. What consent looks like. 2024.

Reiser M. Recantation in child sexual abuse cases. *Child Welfare*. 1991;70(6):611-621.

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Final Report: nature and cause. 2017.

Simpson R, Figgis H. Parliament of New South Wales Briefing Paper no. 21/1997: The age of consent. 1997.

Tener D, Murphy SB. Adult disclosure of child sexual abuse: a literature review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*. 2014;16(4). doi: 10.1177/1524838014537906

Toivonen C. Responding to adult survivors of child sexual abuse across three distinct service sectors: a review of the current literature. NSW Ministry of Health. 2019.

Victorian Government: Victims of Crime. Words used in the justice system. 2024.

Victorian Government. Child sexual exploitation and grooming. 2023.

World Health Organisation. Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence. 2006.

Youth Legal Service. Sex and age of consent. 2020.

